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Desperately Funny: Victorian Widows and the Comical Misfortunes of Husband Hunting

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Abstract

The widow was a much-satirised figure throughout the Victorian era, but humour has rarely featured in studies concerned with the period's attitudes towards women and death. Widows, whose behaviour and dress were subject to many a rule, found themselves the focus of a wealth of jests and jibes that simultaneously highlighted and attempted to mitigate and police widowed women's exceptional position in Victorian society. This article considers some of the most common comical types of widows in Victorian popular culture in jokes, novels, comic songs, and sketches. I argue that it is in the realm of laughter in general, and in the comical iterations of the widow in particular, that we find some of the period's most revealing engagements with the contradictions and ambiguities of middle-class notions of womanhood, femininity, and female sexuality. From unashamed cackles of hilarity to sniggers of discomfort and sneers of disapproval, humour allowed for an exploration of the moral conflicts borne out of the widow's identity as a woman who had once fulfilled her duty as a wife but could transgress and threaten the relational confines of normative femininity and the nuclear family.

Keywords

Victorian widows; mourning; landladies; comedy; marriage

Introduction

The widow was a surprisingly popular source of comedy for the Victorians. If impoverished, she often inspired compelling pleas for sympathy, charity, and social change from writers and artists.[i] If she managed to make do in relative comfort – or at least was not at immediate risk of starvation or destitution – she was the subject of many a joke and jibe. The comical widow tended to be endowed with sufficient means to allow for a degree of financial independence but lacked what she desired most: a new husband. The outrageously cunning, yet laughable, husband hunter had become a familiar and persistent presence in British culture by the time Queen Victoria, who would later become the nation's most famous widow, had ascended the throne. Victoria, unlike virtually any other widow of the period, was criticised for her prolonged mourning of her husband.[ii] In contrast, the fictional husband hunters' (mis)adventures often stemmed from an indecently early, and unattractively strong, craving for a new husband, usually coupled with severe delusions as to her own desirability, and the seemingly sure failure of her hunt. When Frances Trollope published *The Widow Barnaby* (1839),[iii] one reviewer noted that the widow had long been 'a distinct personage in our fictitious literature', occupying 'a place […] entirely apart and individual' ('The Widow Barnaby', 1839, p. 9). Tellingly, the writer assigned her the same status as the long-established stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*,[iv] like Harlequin, the famous comic jester, and Bobadil, the cowardly but harmless bragger ('The Widow Barnaby', 1839, p. 9). The widow's comedic capital lay somewhere between the schemes of the witty trickster and the spectacle of the ridiculous show-off.

Yet, despite the comical widow's prominence, humour has featured only rarely in studies concerned with Victorian attitudes towards women, death, and mourning. Advice literature and advertisements for mourning fashion in magazines, periodicals, and

manuals, in combination with women's diaries and letters, have told us a great deal about the role of mourning fashion and about how women negotiated this complex and costly web of rituals in their everyday lives.[v] In this context, humour functioned as a means to 'create a cultural self-consciousness and to make visible […] almost invisible relationships between rule and violation' (Wagner-Lawlor, 2000, p. xv). And while the second half of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a significant change in attitudes toward mourning rituals and women's rights, the popularity of the widow as a source of comedy barely diminished as funerals became less lavish and women's legal and social freedoms slowly but surely increased.[vi] In her seminal study of single women in female-authored Victorian and modernist fiction, Emma Liggins argues that 'the Victorian widow operates as a disruptive, contradictory presence, threateningly independent and sexually experienced, yet often bound by the tantular' (2014, p. 11), that is, the auntish. From unashamed cackles of hilarity to sniggers of discomfort and sneers of disapproval, humour allowed for the exploration, critique, and regulation of these moral conflicts borne out of the widow's status as a single woman who had once fulfilled her duty as a wife. After all, Søren Kierkegaard (1846) wrote, 'wherever there is contradiction the comic too is present' (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 419). Through their comical renditions of the widow, the sources I consider here demonstrate the 'the power of humour to function as a social corrective' (Wagner-Lawlor, 2000, p. xv), as a reminder of society's written and unwritten rules. Like much Victorian comedy, they 'offered a light look at human folly, and concluded with a lesson in conventional morality' (Romanska and Ackerman, 2017, p. 182). But some of them also simultaneously acted as a subversive 'form of social criticism' (Eco, 1984, p. 8) that highlighted the contradictions, confines, and realities of middle-class womanhood.

I begin this article by delving deeper into the cultural anxieties that led particularly to the middle-aged widow's widespread ridicule but also define the widow's comical treatments independent from her age. Her representations, I suggest, reveal a deep-rooted fear of the widow as a woman of romantic, sexual, and other life experience who was able to manipulate men, particularly eligible bachelors, in line with her own marital desires. Rendered immortal in Trollope's Mrs Barnaby, the middle-aged widow especially became a comical stereotype: a withering, undesirable artefact of womanhood, desperately, foolishly, cunningly, and selfishly seeking a second (or third, or fourth) chance at matrimony. Building on Kay Heath's extensive work on the emergence of middle age during the Victorian era, I look beyond Trollope's famous protagonist as well as considering another prominent type of (usually middle-aged) husband hunter: the widowed landlady. She not only refused to 'age out of sexuality' (Heath, 2009, p. 74) but also conflated notions of the public and the private, love interest and lodger, when her home became the killing trap in her marital pursuit. Finally, I turn my attention to the young widow. Unlike her older counterparts, she was an idealised figure of innocence and loyalty, as Sophie Gilmartin (1997) has shown. What largely has been left unexplored thus far, however, is that she, too, was a common subject of ridicule, and that the young widow posed at least as great a threat as her middle-aged counterpart because she was able to deploy strategically, and hide behind, the angelic stereotype that Victorian society had created. 'Laughter is, above all, a corrective', wrote Henri Bergson (1911, p. 197). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Victorian widow, whose behaviour and dress were subject to much scrutiny and many a rule,[vii] found herself the focus of a wealth of jokes, sketches, comic songs, fiction, and humorous prose. At a time when theorists once more were concerned with whether comedy was to "allow for a release of social pressure or to ridicule vice and punish difference' (Romanska and Ackerman, 2017, p. 185), these

sources, I argue, variously made light of and attempted to mitigate and police the widow's exceptional and contradictory position in Victorian society.

The Gendered Politics of Husband Hunting

'How long does a widow mourn?', asked a joke in the *London Journal* in 1871 (p. 222). 'For a second', the answer reads (p. 222). A widow, this one-liner implied, mourned her husband only until the prospect of a new one presented itself. Her wifely love was fickle, perhaps even feigned, and the pun's humour lies both in the inappropriateness of such a suggestion and in the outrageous behaviour it so succinctly captures. After all, a wife's affections for her spouse were supposed to outlive him: 'her sexuality […] was not to be shared with another man', and thus 'the widow's sex life ended with her husband's death' (Taylor, 1983, p. 59). Her sexuality was buried with his remains, she a grieving figure shrouded in black, defined by her loss, a living memorial to him. An abundance of caricatures throughout the Victorian period made clear that widowed husband hunters, especially if middle-aged, were a pathetic embarrassment to their sex, and their continuing sexual pursuits an offence to Victorian sensibilities. Illustrations of their connubial quests brought to the fore the uncomfortable friction between the pillars of ideal womanhood and the economic, emotional, and sexual realities not only of widowhood but also of the female lifecycle. 'Older women', as Heath notes, 'were denigrated and feared throughout the century' (Heath, 2009, p. 143). The middle-aged widow, in pursuing the most feminine of roles, became the most unfeminine of characters: the desperate husband hunter at whose embarrassing, usually deluded, yet at times frighteningly cunning, schemes the Victorians were invited to laugh disapprovingly, sometimes pensively.

Although the remarrying widow was a cause for much concern and ridicule in Victorian literature and culture, she was, in fact, a rarity in everyday life. For both widows and widowers, the chance at a second walk down the aisle declined as they advanced in years, and 'the Victorians were well aware that the consequences of widowhood varied with age' (Jalland, 1996, p. 254). In 1851, only 4% of widowed women aged 40–44 remarried, whereas for those aged 20–24 the odds of remarriage, though still not favourable, were almost five times as high (Farr, 1885, pp. 78–80). Widowers were far more likely to remarry than widows (Jalland, 1996, p. 254), but were largely spared the cautioning taunts so often levelled at the husband-hunting widow. Victorian widowers, as Pat Jalland (1997) has shown, were encouraged 'to "love and live" again' (p. 256) after their bereavement, while the opposite was true for their female counterparts. A rare criticism of this double standard appeared in a joke in *Pick Me Up*, which stated: 'The widower about to remarry is the most unselfish of mortals. He seldom thinks of Number One' ('Etc.'s', 1894, p. 402).

Ironically, the same society that idealised the notion of a widow's eternal fidelity to her deceased spouse also rendered such fidelity difficult to sustain, even among the financially (more) secure classes. A lack of employment opportunities for women with no trade usually rendered living without a male breadwinner at worst impossible and at best a challenge, unless they had family support or inherited sufficient financial means. With 'their skills […] largely confined to the domestic sphere' (Jalland, 1996, p. 234), these widows often 'had no option but to remarry, even if they did not want to' (Taylor, 1983, p. 59). Those who were able to get by with relative ease might have sought the additional security and prosperity of a second wage earner, or, indeed, the comfort of a male companion to fend off loneliness. Indeed, 'most widows felt dislocated, disorientated, and unutterably alone' (Jalland, 1996, p. 234). If the role of wife was a

woman's natural and ultimate purpose in life, promising a level of satisfaction rivalled only by motherhood, then it was logical that especially young and middle-aged widows felt compelled to secure this position afresh in the hope they once again might find fulfilment. Yet, as Heath reminds us, 'while the need for companionship, sexual and otherwise, was considered an excellent reason for widowers to remarry, the same consolation was offered much less frequently to widows' (2009, p. 119). Rather cruelly, the hilarity of many a fictional widow's quest for a husband lay in her unawareness of both the likely futility of her pursuit and the undesirability of her desperation.

Dangerous Hunters and the Death of Masculinity

No matter how small their chances at another marriage, whether they sought to remarry for romance, financial gains, or both, and whether they were young or middle-aged, widows had experience in matrimonial matters that debutants did not, rendering them potentially dangerous and calculated competitors in the marriage market. Charles Dickens's Mr Weller warned of widows in *The Pickwick Papers* (1838), cautioning readers that 'widders are 'ceptions to ev'ry rule' (p. 237) and worth twenty or more ordinary women when it came to their conniving capacities (Dickens, 2004, p. 237). As one note in the *London Journal* put it, 'the state of widowhood is inconvenient, for one must assume all the modesty of a young girl without being able to feign her ignorance' ('Widowhood', 1864, p. 238). The author of *Hints on Husband Catching* (1846), too, conceded that widows, though 'an important class of husband hunters' (p. 137), hardly need advice in matters of courtship and matrimony: the widow 'has been once, at least, […] successful in her pursuit, and the experience she has gained is likely to prove far more valuable to her, in her pursuit of a second, third, or fourth victim, as the case may be, than any instructions' (p. 137). In comparison to their spinster competitors, widows

were regarded as being two steps ahead in the marriage game. Their 'connubial experiences' ('The Natural History of Courtship',1842, p. 133) meant that widows were not to be trusted.

Bachelors, apparently, had 'a kind of instinctive dread' ('The Natural History of Courtship', 1842, p. 137) of widowed women. Widows, they imagined, were 'more artful and designing than the maiden angel', meaning it was 'more essential to be [on guard] against the machinations of the former than against the "quips, and cranks, and wreathed smiles" of the latter' ('The Natural History of Courtship', 1842, pp. 137–8). But this dread was far from instinctive; rather, it was a socially conditioned response inevitably influenced by the wealth of representations of widows circulating in British culture throughout the century. Indeed, a reviewer of Trollope's *Widow Barnaby* illustrates, in no uncertain (and rather elaborate) terms, that the fictional widow's character was constant:

> the widow remains, one and unalterable, a blithe and self-seeking pursuer of everyman who is marriageable and modest – an unsympathising ogress in the ranks of her own sex – audacious and experienced in planning – resolute in obtaining […] making of her weeds a flower-bed under which lurks artifice and device […]. ('The Widow Barnaby', 1839, pp. 9–10)

At the hands of many a humourist, the widow had become a laughable, selfish, cunning, tenacious, ruthless husband hunter, her schemes veiled by a thin and usually unconvincing layer of respectability, grief, and marital loyalty, all afforded to her by her mourning costume. Consequently, if her hunt was to be successful, she simultaneously had to disguise and deploy the weapon in her arsenal that would serve her the best: her lack of innocence. She had to be proficient in 'the art which conceals art' ('The Widow Barnaby',

1839, p. 133), a skill that writers largely assigned to young widows, to whom I shall turn shortly.

Older women's attempts to disguise their schemes were often represented as hideously contrived and unconvincing, or, as in the case of Mrs MacStinger in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846), non-existent. 'The dreadful Mrs MacStinger' (p. 145) is a relentless husband hunter in constant search of a new man. Frightening and violent, and with a horde of unruly children in tow, the widow is 'a determined woman' (Dickens, 2008, p. 901), a predator 'lying in wait' (Dickens, 2008, p. 127) for her matrimonial prey. When Captain Cuttle witnesses the wedding procession headed by his friend Bunsby and the dreaded widow, it is clear that the groom has no choice in the matter of his impending nuptials. Bunsby, 'so secured by Mrs MacStinger that any effort at self-preservation by flight was rendered futile' (Dickens, 2008, p. 903) and watched over by the widow's procession of friends, who are 'plainly on guard, according to a preconcerted plan' (Dickens, 2008, p. 903), assures his friend that he is not walking down the aisle by his 'own free will' (Dickens, 2008, p. 904). Surrendered to his fate, he finds himself in 'a procession of sacrifice' in which he is 'the victim' (Dickens, 2008, p. 902), with the 'distraught and melancholy visage of a captive borne into a foreign land, meekly resigning himself' (Dickens, 2008, p. 901) to the widow's will. In a twisted satirical take on the then widely circulating reports of *sati*, the Hindu practice of widow burning which 'held a morbid fascination for the Victorians' (Gilmartin, 1997, p. 141), it is the groom, not the widow, who is walking toward his death. The hunt is complete, the prey trapped, emasculated, and resigned to his sacrifice to the insatiable widow, a process likened, here, to the cruelty and pain of death by burning.[viii]

But for Dickens the menace of the husband hunting widow did not end here. 'The most frightful circumstances of the ceremony', the narrator insists, concern the bride's

eldest daughter, Juliana, who, ‘already the image of her parent, observed the whole proceedings’ with ‘deadly interest’ (Dickens, 2008, p. 905). The description of the husband hunter’s female offspring suggests there looms a threat of an entire line of dangerous women, ‘a succession of man-traps stretching out infinitely; a series of ages of oppression and coercion’ (Dickens, 2008, p. 904). Lacking the ignorance and passivity of the debutante who was morally ‘left untested’ and ‘brought up to be perfectly innocent’ (Dickens, 2008, p. 904), the widow’s daughter is sure to deploy the skills imparted on her by her mother. Comical but chilling, the widowed mother came to represent a long-term risk to the established rules and procedures of courtship, and to normative masculinity. Her female offspring was destined to continue her parent’s scheming and unfeminine pursuit of husbands, turning the hunter into the hunted in a gender role reversal. Dickens confronted readers with the comical but terrifying consequences: if the widow’s daughter was the husband hunter of the future, the widow posed a threat to the very fabric of Victorian courtship rituals and gender relations both during and far beyond her own lifetime.[ix] The widow who was in the business of husband hunting was laughable, yet also to be avoided, even feared. Her matrimonial experience rendered her a danger to men, and her hand in marriage meant a certain death to their masculinity.

Widowed Landladies, or, Widows Who Feed on Lodgers

For one particular group of Victorian husband hunters, the quest for romance became a distinctly domestic yet professional affair. The widowed landlady and her relationship with her bachelor lodger were the source of many tragically comical scenes in Victorian song and fiction. The popularity of this figure was undoubtedly rooted in her common appearance in everyday life. As Vicky Holmes (2017) writes, ‘working-class widows were increasingly reliant on the income from lodgers as they moved into old age’ (p. 84).

For middle-class women who were left without any regular earnings or a trade on which to fall back, their homes also became an earning opportunity. ‘Women who had been comfortable while a husband lived might find themselves without an income on his death’, explains Margaret Ponsonby (2007), as business assets could be ‘left to a son, or [used] to settle debts’ (p. 132). A widowed landlady’s home, however, like any household that ‘did not contain a family’, was ideologically ‘incomplete’, and therefore ‘did not constitute the ideal home’ (Ponsonby, 2007, p. 132). Much of the comedy surrounding widowed lodging-house keepers relies on the uncomfortable notion that the widow’s lodger filled the vacant space left by the departed spouse, and that in each gentleman guest the landlady saw either a potential new husband, a victim whose purse could be exploited for her profit, or even both.

The landlady’s responsibility was to provide a welcoming home and to be mindful of her lodgers’ needs, thereby fulfilling her feminine duties in a role that was neither that of wife nor entirely that of a servant. Turning the private haven of the home into a place of business could be an ideologically uncomfortable scenario. For a middle-class widow, one writer notes, letting out ‘apartments’ is ‘beneath her dignity […], but she does not object to receiving a few “paying guests”’, which are invariably ‘superior persons like herself’ (‘Twenty-One Days in London’, 1900, p. 11). Her public advertisements, supposedly, were not-so-thinly-veiled calls for a husband, and consequently ‘every widow who “has a vacancy” for a gentleman likes to advertise not merely that she is young but that she has no children’ (‘Twenty-One Days in London’, 1900, p. 11). Elsewhere, widows ruthlessly *feed* on lodgers, or so a *Punch* (1842) sketch of the pleasures of Ramsgate told its readers: ‘the natives’ of the coastal tourist destination are ‘cannibals’, and ‘half-a-dozen single men are found quite sufficient to feed a widow and child or two for a year, if subsisting in the moderate way’ (‘Ramsgate’, p. 48).

Accompanied by a sketch of 'a trussed lodger' served on a plate and in the shape of a rabbit, widowed landladies 'have the grace of economy; and for the whole twelve months live upon the lodgers caught in the season' ('Ramsgate', p. 48).

A major source of hilarity usually lay in the widow's spectacular failure or downright refusal to provide the ideal home for her male guests or in her embarrassing romantic pursuit of a resistant lodger. Mrs MacStinger's lodger, Captain Cuttle, rarely comes and goes without elaborate schemes of avoiding the volatile widow, 'his terrible enemy' (Dickens, 2008, p. 127) and her 'uncertain temper' (Dickens, 2008, p. 243). Dickens likens their relationship to that of enemies at war, and their respective tactics as calculated warfare. The landlady's home becomes an arena of battle rather than a safe haven. In Henry Miller's comic song 'The Saucy Little Widow Down in Pimlico' (1864), a visitor to London is ensnared by his landlady, a 'fascinating, young and fair' widow, a 'charming little creature' (Miller, 1864). But he soon realises that the widow is stealing his tea and sugar, and when the lodger confronts her he is met with an unexpectedly violent reaction: 'she answe'd not a word', but 'fetch'd a big birch broom, / and beat me with it, while she chased me round and round the room' (Miller, 1864). The landlady's rooms, then, often became a trap in which many an unsuspecting lodger was treated to unpleasant – not infrequently violent – surprises.

One of the most common and comical characteristics of the widowed landlady were her desperate romantic desires for her lodger and the misunderstandings that result from it. In *The Pickwick Papers* (1838), Dickens presents us with Martha Bardell, an aged picture of womanhood: 'the relict and sole executrix of a deceased custom-house officer', she 'was a comely woman of bustling manners and agreeable appearance, with a natural genius for cooking, improved by study and long practice, into an exquisite talent' (Dickens, 2004, p. 150). She keeps a house in which 'cleanliness and quiet reigned', and

where her lodger's 'will was law' (Dickens, 2004, p. 150). When Samuel Pickwick attempts to tell his landlady that he intends to take a man servant, however, the conversation takes a confusing turn: Mrs Bardell, who 'had long worshipped Mr. Pickwick at a distance', is convinced he is working his way towards the all-important question of marriage, and that she will be 'raised to a pinnacle to which her wildest and most extravagant hopes had never dared to aspire' (Dickens, 2004, p. 152). As their confused exchange continues, Mrs Bardell, no longer able to contain herself, 'flung her arms round Mr. Pickwick's neck, with a cataract of tears and a chorus of sobs', leaving the object of her affections 'struggling violently' against the emotional assault while she faints with excitement (Dickens, 2004, p. 152).

An almost identical scene occurs in W. H. Swepstone's *The Two Widows, or Matrimonial Jumbles* (1853). Mrs Mildew, 'a stout buxom widow, of about forty' (Swepstone, 1853, p. 10), who, as her name implies, becomes an undesirable attachment to available men. Like Dickens's Mrs Bardle, she believes her lodger, parish beadle Samuel Bargeman,[x] is in love with her, a notion that both to him and to the reader appears, at first, ludicrous, especially given the presence of a beautiful, rich, and thus seemingly much more desirable widow, who is the actual object of Bargeman's affections. Ignorant of her feelings for him, Bargeman, confides in his enamoured landlady that he is experiencing a trouble of 'the heart' (Swepstone, 1853, p. 10). Unaware of his affections for another woman, the widow expects that 'the beadle was about to make a declaration of the state of his feelings, of course in her favour, as she had, to tell the truth, been long expecting' (Swepstone, 1853, p. 10). From this moment in their conversation, Mrs. Mildew, like Mrs. Bardell, rushes to conclusions and soon considers the practicalities of remarrying before any explicit proposal has been made. With no time to lose, Mrs. Mildew 'made up her mind to limit the days of her widowhood; and to allow the banns

to be put at the church instantly: they could be read on the next Sunday, and then, in three weeks' time, Mrs Mildew would become Mrs Bargeman' (Swepstone, 1853, p. 10). In these comically confused scenes, the status of the domestic home as a commodity, coupled with the widows' desperation for a new spouse, results in their inability to distinguish business from romance, lodger from husband, turning every word and action into a hint at matrimony.

This uncomfortably blurred boundary was made particularly clear in Swepstone's novel, where the lodger quite literally replaces the late husband. Once Mrs Mildew has convinced herself that Bargeman has made an implicit proposal of marriage, her thoughts turn to the late Mr. Mildew. Her husband had been 'dead a twelvemonth' (Swepstone, 1853, p. 10), meaning she had only just come out of deep mourning. But the widow's moral apprehensions are short-lived, and span all but one sentence (or 'a second', as the *London Journal* would put it). Once Mrs Mildew has mentally planned her second wedding, she not only begins to erase the presence of her late husband from their marital home by slowly packing away his ornaments but also turns her lodger into Mr Mildew's successor by giving the dead man's clothes to the beadle. Just as Dickens had done only months earlier in the form of serial widow Mrs Badger in *Bleak House* (1853) – whose current husband takes pride in showing guests the various prominently displayed portraits of his wife's distinguished late husbands – Swepstone makes light of 'the vulgarity' and discomfort that lay 'in the abrupt juxtaposition of mourning and wedding [… and in] the presence of two men who should never meet' (Gilmartin, 1997, p. 144).

The equilibrium of the home can only be re-established if the domestic sphere was firmly divided from the realm of business. Mrs Bardell wins a lawsuit against her lodger 'for breach of promise of marriage' (Dickens, 2004, p. 469) thanks to her lawyer's melodramatic depiction of the plaintiff as a respectable, innocent widow who looked to

her 'single gentlemen' lodgers for 'protection, for assistance, for comfort, and for consolation' (Dickens, 2004, p. 469). To the reader, the lawyer's exaggerated description of Mrs Bardell was at direct odds with the ridiculous woman they had witnessed so far and thus acts as a warning that behind the widow's respectable cloak of mourning rarely lies an innocent angel. After several twists and turns, Mrs Bardell continues to 'let lodgings to many conversable single gentlemen, with great profit, but never brought any more actions for breach of promise of marriage' (Dickens, 2004, p. 797). The widowed landlady's marital home became a space of respectable business because it was no longer entangled with the business of marriage.

Mrs Mildew, however, receives a somewhat more favourable treatment. In Swepstone's novel, it transpires that it was actually not the middle-aged widowed landlady who was deluded about her marital appeal but her lodger. Bargeman realises only on the day of the beautiful, rich widow's marriage that he is not her husband-to-be and that, in fact, he was naïve to think a woman of her class, wealth, and looks would ever consider marrying the parish beadle. Disappointed and shamed, Bargeman returns to Mrs Mildew, who forgives and marries him. Yet, in the end, it is Mrs Mildew who is the widow worth having: she is a diligent and experienced domestic manager who – though on occasion a touch dramatic – is grateful for the affection and returns it by providing a welcoming and loving home, which, once the lodger becomes a husband, becomes a purely domestic space again, no longer tainted by the confusing mixture of business and romance.

Portrayals such as Swepstone's were rare. If the makeup of a household affected 'the moral welfare of the inhabitants of a house' (Ponsonby, 2007, p. 132), then there inevitably was something amiss with the landlady's abode, no matter how hard she tried to fill the spot once occupied by her husband or disguise the conflation of home and

business, private and public. Her ‘incomplete household’ could not possibly be a conduit for the idealised domestic peace and comfort of the middle-class family home it tried to mimic. Her failures in making it so, however, provided a rich source of amusement, be it through the consequences and misunderstandings caused by her desperation and delusion, or through her hilarious yet disturbing wilfulness and determination.

The young widow

If the success of a widow’s husband hunt relied on her ability to disguise her experience and schemes behind a veil of innocence, then the young widow had a distinct advantage in comparison to her older counterpart. The young widow held a special, highly idealised place in the Victorian imagination. Indeed, there was a ‘celebration in literature and painting of the young and beautiful widow, faithful to her husband's ashes’ (Gilmartin, 1997, p. 144). In 1837, a short piece in an annual reminded its readers that while the English had long been accustomed to making fun of widows, laughing at them at home was much kinder than burning them: here, ‘by our milder manners’, the widow ‘is merely ridiculed’, while ‘on the ruder banks of the Ganges, [she] is literally roasted’ (‘Widows’, p. 336). The crude reference to *sati* was no coincidence. The English expressed much outrage at this ritual, but, as Sophie Gilmartin (1997) has illustrated so convincingly, their outrage also revealed an undeniable fascination and fetishization of this act of wifely devotion, especially if the widow was young: ‘the faithful woman is sentimentalized’ (p. 144), and *sati*, as the ultimate demonstration of marital loyalty, disturbed English sensibilities as much as it provoked a thinly-veiled admiration. Thus, in many English accounts the reverence for the Hindu widow parallels the ‘sentimentalization of the faithful young widow in English culture’ (Gilmartin, 1997, p. 144). But the young widow presented a more complex web of contradictions than this idealised figure suggests.

Her image was so prevalent that the author of 'The Natural History of Courtship' demanded: 'Show me a more agreeable person than a young widow!' (1842, p. 133). Tongue-in-cheek, they proceed to list the infinite qualities of this legendary creature. Though no longer the attractive innocent she was as a virginal debutant, her experience could translate into appealing characteristics that rendered her a desirable wife once more. Young widows, the piece suggested, were straight-talking and 'do not often say "no" when they mean "yes"' ('The Natural History of Courtship', 1842, p. 133). Crucially, they apparently excelled at making their courtship schemes appear innocent and natural rather than a product of calculation and slyness: 'their designs', the author marvels, 'are carried out with such spirit and dexterity' that they 'seem like the most ingenuous simplicity' ('The Natural History of Courtship', 1842, p. 133). Young widows even 'have an enchanting habit of meeting one half-way – nay of occasionally advancing the first half' but are yet reserved enough so as to not seem unattractively eager, unlike the unskilful 'simpering spinster' ('The Natural History of Courtship', 1842, p. 133). The young widow comes with the benefits of marital experience while her age still renders her desirable rather than passé and helps her to disguise her lack of innocence convincingly.

But, as *Punch*'s exaggerations insinuate, this image was an idealised fantasy, and it was, indeed, enthusiastically mocked and crushed by many a joke and song. A look at the sketches and witticisms in Victorian periodicals and newspapers reveals that the young widow's outward grief and fidelity were mere affectations which render her more attractive to a new husband. One joke, titled 'That Is Love', tells of a young widow who assures her suitors 'that her heart was among the ashes in the urn' (1912, p. 202). Yet, she remarries and, on a cold winter's day, uses the remains of her late beloved to ensure her second husband's safe passage down the frozen front doorsteps. A common source of

comedy was the suggestion that young widows' tears were induced by onions rather than grief. In one of many examples, a woman coyly smiles behind a fan, eyeing up someone outside of the frame, with a flushed cheek, and two tears streaming down her face. In the background, a market seller alerts her that onions are available today. 'Here's a charming young widow for sale – who'll buy', the caption reads, 'With a smile on her cheek and a tear in her eye' ('To a Young Widow', 1845). The young widow, the sketch insinuated, was available to the highest bidder. Her tears, not for the first time, are induced by the eye-watering vegetable and give the impression she is a respectable, grieving woman, making her more appealing to potential suitors. In these and many other sources, the young widow's supposedly admirable sorrow and loyalty are disingenuous and, to make matters worse, function as instruments in her schemes to attract a new husband.

The more obvious, eager, and early such pursuits, the less attractive the young widow becomes, especially when she begins her search for a new husband while still in the guise of deep mourning for her former. The eponymous speaker of 'The Young Widow: A Comic Song' (1854) was in a hurry, too, aware that her appeal will wane quickly with age. Not yet out of deep mourning, with her husband 'dead six months at least', she has decided 'tis folly to mourn so for one that's deceas'd' and 'can't bear to be a young widow' (Farmer and Willy). It was clear she was no example of the sentimentalised image revered in the Victorian imagination. Rather, the song lifts the veil on the supposed reality of the workings of a young widow's mind. With unashamed disregard for mourning rituals and little grief for her late husband, she complains about the 'odious custom to wait for a year' (Farmer and Willy, 1854), and reminds her audience that 'there's no time lose, / Half mourning I put on tomorrow / Look at me – just hear me – you cannot refuse, / I've only six month left for sorrow' (Farmer and Willy, 1854). The

young widow's grief for her late husband is established as a ruse, and the more eager her desire to marry, the more her desirability diminishes.

But it was not only her lack of decency and her willingness to defy Victorian mourning rituals that make comical renditions of the young widow unattractive. Accustomed to seeing herself as a highly desirable woman, the young widow reveals her demanding list of requirements for her prospective fiancé. Blessed with an apparently unrivalled 'sweetness of temper' (Farmer and Willy), she asks that her husband-to-be display 'due submission' and 'serve me with zeal' (Farmer and Willy), while fulfilling all the domestic duties of a wife or servant, and reminds him that 'I must be master' (Farmer and Willy), and that her every mood must be endured unquestioningly. Still deludedly certain of her appeal and of the reasonableness of her demands, she cautions her intended audience of masses of suitors to not 'all speak at once, only one at a time' (Farmer and Willy). The song's last line belies not only that the widow expects to be married again very soon but also implies she is certain she will outlive her next husband, too, and that if men were to miss their chance now, they 'must wait till again I'm a widow' (Farmer and Willy). As appealing as her idealised image may seem, the young widow lacks the admirable loyalty that was so often ascribed to her. Instead, she is a fickle and impatient woman, and, to make matters worse, the sentimentalised stereotype has rendered her a demanding mistress aware of her superficial appeal and in search of a servant rather than a master.

Other comic songs told the stories of men's encounters with such women, and listeners were encouraged to laugh and shake their heads as much – if not more – at the ignorance of the naïve bachelor as at the designs of the young widow. The protagonist of Arthur Lloyd's 'Beautiful Young Widow Brown' (1865) falls in love with the eponymous woman at first sight. He courts the widow and spoils her with gifts and attention. He

proposes marriage, but she refuses to give him an immediate response and promises to have an answer in two weeks' time. Yet, when the hopeful suitor calls on her a fortnight later, 'she'd married a man called O'Grady' (Lloyd, 1865). Disappointed at his loss, the bachelor is laughed at by his friends for his gullibility. The young widow, he has learned, is not to be trusted, and has so many suitors she can choose and exploit at her will, especially if – like beautiful young widow Brown – she was financially as well as physically attractive.

Lloyd's was far from the only song to caution against the schemes of young widows and ridicule the naivety of the men who fall for her. 'The Charming Young Widow I Met in the Train' (1863) tells of a young man who, on the train to Glasgow, encounters a 'charming young widow' (Cove, 1863) in the first-class carriage. 'Fairly reeled with excitement', the bachelor becomes 'enchanted' by his fellow traveller, and her appeal only grows when she '[chokes] with sobs' upon being asked about her young child's father, at the thought of whom her 'heart breaks with pain' (Cove, 1863). Having sought solace by leaning her head on the stranger's breast, at the next station the widow implores him to hold her child so she may leave the train for a moment, but she never boards it again. The unsuspecting bachelor panics when the train jerks back into motion, but he soon realises that he has been robbed of all his valuables by the woman he now describes as the 'artful' and 'crafty young widow' who had left him with 'a dummy' (Cove, 1863) rather than a real baby. The song ends with a warning to his fellow: 'beware of young widows you meet on the railway / Who lean on your shoulder, whose tears fall like rain / Look out for your pockets – in case they resemble / *The* charming young widow I met in the train' (Cove, 1863). These comic songs instigate incredulous laughter not necessarily because of the titular woman's schemes but because of the bachelor who is naïve enough to fall for her innocent façade. The young widow is a well-disguised threat:

she was able to feign the innocence of a girl, but – unlike her victims – far from ignorant of her appeal.

Conclusion

What I have considered here is a broad and comparatively small sample of the wealth of comical iterations of the figure of the widow that circulated in Victorian popular culture. It is in her humorous exploits that we find some of the period's most acute and revealing engagements with the contradictions, ambiguities, and consequences of the relational confines of ideal middle-class womanhood. What pervades in these sources is an undeniable fear that the mourning costume of a widow might indeed not have signalled her undying love and grief for her husband, but instead disguised their absence and, at worst, could even aid the husband-hunting widow in her quest for a new spouse. Economic and social realities as well as cultural norms which defined women in relational terms often made it difficult and undesirable for widows to be on their own. Yet, ridicule acted as a means to deter those who sought to escape the fate of loneliness and refused to suppress their desires for romantic companionship in the name of sexless service, the only role in which Victorian society could tolerate the widow's exceptional status as a single woman. Laughter, 'being intended to humiliate, […] must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it.' (Bergson, 1911, p. 197). It is no surprise, then, that the woman who was no longer constrained by either the laws or the husband that governed her as a wife would be such a popular subject of jokes intended to mitigate her social status and, by means of interpellation, regulate her behaviour, while at the same time instilling in the public's minds an inherent distrust towards her. The husband hunting widow, with few exceptions, was laughable but also dangerous, her selfish romantic pursuits a threat to the nuclear

family and to normative gender roles. But some of these texts, by directing readers' laughter at the young widow's victims, also show a keen awareness and implicit critique of the fact that one of Victorian society's most idealised images of femininity had become an inevitable means of undermining the very norms it was intended to reinforce. Some widows, it seems, no matter how laughable, could still have the last laugh.

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[i] See, for example: William Clugston, *The Widow and the Fatherless; An Appeal on Behalf of the Patriotic Fund* (Forfar: William Shepherd and C. Laing, 1854); Richard Cobbold, [1846] *Mary Anne Wellington: The Soldier's Daughter, Wife and Widow* (London: Clarke, Beeton, & Co., 1853); and Sir Samuel Luke Fildes, *Admissions to the Casual Ward* (1874); Thomas Benjamin Kennington, *The Pinch of Poverty* (1889).

[ii] See, for example, the following sketch, published in response to a commentary on the Queen's physical health in the *Lancet* and the public discontentment with her continuing neglect of her public duties: 'Slandered by Traitors', *Judy* (14 August 1867), p. 5.

[iii] Frances Trollope's Widow Barnaby trilogy became the blueprint for representations of the middle-aged Victorian widow. Martha Barnaby is a serial widow whose mourning for her husbands is as insincere as her appetite for social climbing is insatiable.

[iv] The *commedia dell'arte* was a popular, improvised form of comedy in Italy in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, relying on stock characters.

[v] See Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[vi] Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 199–203.

[vii] Generally speaking, widows were expected to wear mourning clothes for two years: deep mourning of paramatta and crape for the first twelve months, and gradually lighter fabrics and colours for the subsequent twelve months and half mourning, though sources from the period vary on the finer points and timescales. Most social engagements and unnecessary

appearances in public were prohibited for a year, with a gradual lifting of restrictions during the second half of the mourning period. See: Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, pp. 300–301.

[viii] We know little of Bunsby's fate after the unhappy nuptials, but Dickens had already imagined the life of a widow's second husband a few years prior, in *Oliver Twist* (1838), where workhouse matron Mrs Corney (later Mrs Bumble) violently beats her new husband into submission.

[ix] Interestingly, widowed mothers posed a threat no matter the sex of their child. Repeatedly, satirists and writers represented them as neglectful parents consumed by their selfish marital pursuits, while sons were often described as overly attached to their widowed mothers and as having to assert their independence and masculinity, and daughters figured as enslaved companions and carers to their widowed mothers, frequently at risk of their own chances at marriage and happiness.

[x] A parish beadle was a local church official tasked with ushering congregations at services or administering the church's local charitable affairs.

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